

THE JOURNAL BOOK

by

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and

Chuck Kleinhans

INTRODUCTION

This book makes a radical assumption for a writing textbook: that books don't teach writing, teachers do. Thus, we planned this book as a supplemental text for teachers, and we aimed at giving students typical, useful, and challenging writing experiences without specifying a particular approach.

We believe students need to practice writing to learn writing. Many teachers have found journals a useful way of getting students to write regularly. Typically, the student writes a minimum number of pages per week, usually about themselves and their daily experiences. The journals are handed in regularly and checked for completion of the assignment, but they are usually not checked or graded for organization, grammar, and so forth. Journal assignments have several advantages. Students write on a regular basis and are encouraged to analyze their lives and experiences. Since the assignments are not graded for correctness, the student works in a non-threatening situation. The journal is also easy on overworked teachers who want to give students writing practice but who don't have the time to closely grade every assignment.

However, in using journals, we discovered that students often find it hard to make connections between the personal journal and the classroom essay. There's no assurance that the student will challenge him/her self to try something difficult, and students sometimes write the journal "for the teacher", thus invalidating the personal and exploratory potential of the

exercise. Or else they find they "don't know what to say" because they believe their own experiences and lives are not appropriate subjects for their writing.

We believe that our organized topics and our techniques overcome many of the disadvantages of journals while keeping many of the advantages. The student has a specific assignment (each takes about one notebook page) which usually relates to their familiar experience. Classroom learning can be directly supplemented (or anticipated) by writing practice. For example, exercises on introductions can be assigned before formal instruction, during and after the time the topic is covered in class, and/or later as a review or refresher. By using this book for weekly journal assignments, the teacher can give students experience with a variety of situations, subjects, and purposes. For the teacher this is a flexible way to get students writing.

Our approach is pragmatic and aimed at students who spend considerable time in English writing courses: high school, first year college, remedial, English as a second language, etc. Given the different educational backgrounds of our students, our stress has been on everyday life--basic familiar experience--as a common denominator for writing.

The exercises in this book were developed for and tested out in our own classes. In teaching we modified and refined our experiences and then tested the revised exercises too. In addition, other teachers tried them out in practice. They found that our emphasis--on getting students to write and assuming that the teachers will handle the explanations of rhetoric, organization, and grammar--makes good sense.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The way we use the assignments in our classes is as follows: we give the students a certain number of journals to write--possibly 2 to 5 a week. A group or set might consist of an unstructured journal, a structured journal and a language journal, or possibly several journals practicing the same skill--whatever seems to best complement what's going on in the classroom at the time. The students then write the assignments at home, writing around a page for each assignment, and submit them on the date due. The journals can be written either in a notebook, if the teacher plans to grade them in class while the students are doing another assignment, or they can be written on loose sheets, which are easier for the teacher to carry.

We grade the completed journals on the basis of quantity, for example, giving 4 points for four assignments, 3 points for three assignments, etc., with the points accumulating throughout the term and eventually being figured into the final grade. This means that it is not necessary for teachers to read each journal assignment; the assignments merely have to be counted. However, we will confess that we can never resist the temptation to read them, as often our students find their real "voices" in the journal long before they express themselves in their essay writing.

Since we don't look for errors in journal writing, they are an excellent place for us to comment on a student's strengths in writing, instead of his/her weaknesses. In fact, often we get

permission to read one or two journals in class so that we can share them with the other students. We only point out errors when a student is practicing a specific skill, like writing a thesis statement, and shows a misunderstanding of a writing concept. But spelling, grammar errors, sentence errors, etc. are consistently ignored, because otherwise the student feels too constrained to write freely.

This is not, however, the only way to use the journals. Another possibility is to make the student responsible for a fixed number of assignments per week, but then allow the student to choose his/her own assignments from the ones in the book. A third option that we've tried is to give individual assignments instead of class-wide ones. So, for instance, a student who needed work on writing paragraphs would be assigned journals from section 2 on paragraphs, while a student who was more advanced than the rest of the class might be set to work on some of the more sophisticated style or argument exercises.

The book is designed to be eclectic; any teacher of writing at any level should be able to adapt it to his/her classes. We recommend that the teacher familiarize him/herself with the assignments before the term begins, and then use them in any way that will accord with that teacher's particular approach to teaching writing.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors, Rory Stephens and Chuck Kleinhans, are both experienced teachers of writing. They started working together at Chicago State University where they began writing journal assignments together for their classes. Later, they both worked in the English Language Program at Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago.

Between the two of them, they have taught courses in: basic writing, English as a second language, college composition, high school English, writing term papers, remedial writing, technical writing, argumentation, practical writing, and study skills, as well as teaching elementary school, literature, and film.

Chuck Kleinhans has a Ph.D in Comparative Literature from Indiana University. In addition to teaching, he is the co-editor of Jump Cut, a film magazine. Currently he teaches film at Northwestern University.

Rory Stephens teaches basic writing in the English Language Program at Northeastern Illinois University and has a M.A. in English from the University of Chicago. She is presently working on a doctoral degree in Linguistics at Northwestern University.

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